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LINGUISTICS AND WRITTEN COMPOSITION (AN ABSTRACT).

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SINCE LINGUISTICS IS A SCIENCE AND COMPOSITION IS A SKILL, THE TWO AREAS MEET ONLY WHEN THE LINGUIST AND THE TEACHER OF COMPOSITION DESCEND FROM THEIR PRIMARY OCCUPATIONS TO THE PRACTICAL CONSIDERATION OF HOW ONE WORD IS PLACED AFTER ANOTHER IN A SENTENCE. THE LINGUIST CONCERNS HIMSELF MAINLY WITH COLLECTING AND ARRANGING INFORMATION TO SUPPORT OR DISPROVE HIS THEORIES AND IDEAS ABOUT LANGUAGE. THE COMPOSITION TEACHER CONCERNS HIMSELF WITH ENCOURAGING AND TRAINING STUDENTS TO WRITE WITH ACCEPTABLE COMPETENCE. EACH IS BEST EMPLOYED IN HIS OWN FIELD, YET EACH MUST ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND THE OTHER'S VIEWPOINT AND TO OFFER AID TO HIS CO-WORKER. IDEALLY, THE LINGUIST MUST UNDERSTAND THAT THE COMPOSITION TEACHER IS NOT CONCERNED PRIMARILY WITH GRAMMAR BUT WITH RHETORIC, AND THE TEACHER OF COMPOSITION MUST DRAW ON THE LINGUIST'S KNOWLEDGE TO BECOME HIS OWN APPLIED LINGUIST. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (LH)

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TE000 448

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LINGUISTICS AND WRITTEN COMPOSITION
(An Abstract)

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The members of this Institute have been studying, or at least hearing and talking about, language and something called *linguistics* all week. Although I know the distinguished linguists who have addressed you, I cannot be sure of all they have said, nor of what notions you have gathered from their talks. Perhaps what I have to say will be tautological, perhaps contradictory, perhaps merely new. But there are some important things that I believe ought to be said, even at the risk of tautology. My topic—linguistics and written composition—comes to the heart of the matter because it faces the principal, recognized problem in English teaching. I don't believe that it is the biggest such problem; there are two others that I consider more serious, but I will postpone mentioning them until the end of my talk.

Science Meets Art

Let us begin with the fundamental fact that linguistics is a science (or at least a quasi- or pseudo-science), while composition is either a skill or an art, perhaps both. The relationship between the two is thus the tenuous one that exists between disciplines that are divergent in purpose, method, and philosophy; such as, for example, physics and musical composition, or biochemistry and cooking. On the one hand, the scientist is often aloof from or even scornful of the aims and worries of the craftsman or artist; on the other, the artist is suspicious or contemptuous of the scientist. I have met linguists who looked upon teachers of composition as futile drudges, and teachers of composition, journalists, and writers who look upon linguists as boorish or subversive menaces to the integrity of language. The fact that both are wrong doesn't make the antipathy any weaker.

Paradoxically, in spite of this natural antipathy, attitudes of an opposite sort exist. Some linguists believe that because they know about language they are capable of teaching its use; some composition teachers in their despair grasp at the linguist as a lifesaver to lift them out of the Slough of Despond which is their frequent habitat. Much disillusionment has been occasioned on both sides. Any really wholesome relationship must be based on a thorough understanding

TE 000 448

of the aims, methods, powers, and limitations on both sides. Let us ask, then, three questions:

1. What is a linguist and what does he do?
2. What is a composition teacher and what does he do?
3. What has either of them to offer the other?

The Linguist and His Work

A linguist, as I have said, is a scientist. His subject matter is language. He is concerned with such broad questions as:

> What is language?
> How does it work?
> What are its parts and how do they fit together?
> How do languages differ and what do they have in common?

as well as with more specific questions about particular languages—their structure, history, and relationships. Around the edges of the discipline of linguistics are important peripheral studies like psycho-linguistics and socio-linguistics, whose hyphenated titles indicate their interests.

The principal occupations of the linguist relate to seeking solutions for these questions. Specifically, the "pure" linguist—

> works away at theory, attempting to find the best ways to study, describe, and to some degree at least, explain the workings of language and languages;
>
> goes into the field to collect material, which he gathers, records, preserves, classifies, and publishes; makes use of materials collected by others;
>
> synthesizes concepts, ideas, relationships, etc., on the basis of such materials; teaches linguistics to future linguists and others, including English teachers.

There is also the *applied linguist*. This curious title does not mean that the linguist is himself applied to anything; it is a back-formation from *applied linguistics*. The applied linguist (who is often a pure linguist with another hat on) brings linguistic knowledge to bear on such problems as—the teaching (and learning) of languages—how they can be made more efficient;

> devising writing systems for hitherto unwritten languages;
>
> helping technicians of various sorts with machine translation and other technological gadgetry (much of this kind of work is sponsored by various government agencies, including the armed forces, which are understandably interested in problems of communication);

working with psychologists, reading specialists, and others on problems of language learning and the teaching and learning of reading;

preparing dictionaries, concordances, editions, glossaries, grammars, and other similar materials for the general public or for students and teachers.

The Composition Teacher and His Work

I hardly need to tell this group what a composition teacher is and what he does, but I will, for the sake of the completeness and symmetry of my plan. A composition teacher is a pedagogue (I use the term with pride, not ironic derogation.) He is thus not primarily a researcher or a theorist; in his role as teacher of composition he does not hope to add to the sum of human knowledge. Instead his primary aim is to encourage and help his students to write well or at least with acceptable competence. He is concerned with teaching the solutions to such problems as—

finding a subject and separating it from the disorganized welter of experience;

seeing clearly the issues to be faced and the facts, opinions, attitudes, and emotions related to them;

putting material that comes helter-skelter to the mind into orderly and rational shape;

finding and shaping the language appropriate to the subject, the writer, the audience, and the aim;

presenting the organized material in this appropriate language, in accordance with the accepted conventions of a writing system that preserves this language in a form that is overt, transmissible, and preservable.

These aims the composition teacher traditionally carries out by—

assigning topics to be written on;

reading the results and commenting on or "correcting" them;

teaching, more or less directly, certain practices, skills, aids, devices, and principles, such as outlining, paragraph development, use of the dictionary, logical reasoning, punctuation, spelling, proper acknowledgment of sources, appropriate choice of words, etc., etc.;

discussing and analyzing samples of writing: (a) by students, to reveal their faults, and (b) by professionals, to reveal their excellences.

The Linguist and the Composition Teacher

It is apparent that these two occupations overlap very little if at all. They come within hailing distance only where both descend from their major preoccupations—the linguist with theory and the

rhetorician with teaching plan, direction, order, and logic—to deal with practical considerations like how one word is to be placed after another to make a sentence. This is the area commonly called *grammar,* though the linguist and the composition teacher don't mean quite the same thing by that term. The linguist is likely to think of grammar as either a repertory of patterns into which words are put according to rather complex rules of distribution, selection, and arrangement, or else a series of processes of conjunction, division, manipulation, and alteration through which words are strung together and shaped into sentences. The composition teacher is likely to think of grammar as a collection of warnings, prohibitions, and recommendations designed to prevent the student from writing in his naturally crude and inaccurate way. The linguist may well consider the composition teacher unduly preoccupied with what might be called linguistic sanitation. The composition teacher—as well as the journalist, literary critic, and professional writer—usually considers the linguist so bemused with what *is* that he does not know or care what is right.

What can these two disparate persons do for each other? I suggest two things—

1. stick to their own lasts;
2. attempt to understand each other.

1. (a) The linguist should be allowed and encouraged to develop theory and work out details. His major preoccupation should be the writing of grammars. Except when he puts on his "applied linguist" robes, he should not be forced to account for this theories and his grammars on grounds of practical expediency, congeniality with accepted prejudices, or classroom effectiveness. If his grammars are complex, they should be examined critically to determine whether the complexity is due to an overly elaborate theory or to an inherent complexity in the subject matter. If his terminology is new and strange, it should be examined to determine whether he is merely giving new and polysyllabic names to old ideas or creating necessary and consistent new names for new ideas. He is, after all, a scientist, and the controlling motive of all reputable science is to increase knowledge and understanding by observation, analysis, speculation, hypothesis, and generalization. The increase of knowledge brought about by science is not always comfortable, and its consequences may be far-reaching. But the scientific enterprise must not be blamed for the use that irresponsible people make of its findings.

2. (a) In return for the privilege of being allowed to carry on his own work, the linguist must refrain from an arrogant attitude

toward the nonlinguist. If he is to venture into the field of application, he must find out the goals and problems of those primarily concerned with the area where his knowledge and advice are sought. In the field of composition he must recognize that the teacher of composition is not a grammarian but a rhetorician (and a pedagogue), and he must accept the consequences.

1. (b) The teacher of composition must also stick to his last, which is to help students acquire a versatile, mature, and fluent command of their native language in its standard written form. He is the best judge of the means thereto and must make his own decisions. If his judgment tells him that his goals can be more easily attained by using or even teaching ideas, facts, and theories from other disciplines, such as grammar, logic, and semantics, he should be free to do so. But he must then accept the responsibility of using the best ideas, facts, and theories. He has no more right to teach antiquated grammar or logic than he has to require his students to write like Dr. Johnson or the *King James Bible.*

2. (b) When the composition teacher ventures into the linguist's territory, he must understand the primarily scientific orientation of the linguist. He must realize that grammars are not written with the primary aim of making them easy for school children—or school teachers—to learn. He must attempt to distinguish between truth and utility, and not accuse the linguist of irresponsibility because he does not make his truths immediately useful. If he wants certain services from the linguist, he must make clear just what these are, and not be surprised if the linguist finds them incompatible with his main and overpowering interests. In the end he must be prepared to become his own applied linguist.

Directions and Diagnoses

To summarize:

Linguistics is a science; composition is a skill and an art.

The linguist is primarily concerned with collecting information and ordering it according to his hypotheses and theories about language.

The composition teacher is primarily concerned with training students in the acquisition of a suitable prose style.

Each of these is best employed at his own proper task, which has both privileges and obligations.

Each must assume and be granted primary responsibility and authority in his own field.

Each must understand and respect the other's aims and problems when they impinge on his, and not make judgments based on ignorance, prejudice, or mistrust.

I said at the beginning that I thought the greatest problem in English teaching is not composition, in fact that there are two even more important ones. I doubt that you are suffering unduly from the suspense of not knowing what these are, but it is only fair at this point to name them. They are—

1. The teaching of literature. The appalling ignorance and bad taste of the general public in literature is evidence of a massive failure of our schools and colleges to teach it effectively. This is part of the larger question of the position of the arts in our society, which we cannot enter into here but which must not be overlooked.

2. The teaching about language. The ignorance, misunderstanding, prejudice, and superstition in the area of language are even more distressing (to me, at least) than in literature and the arts.

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